



# the Lattimer massacre

From the end of the American Civil War until the 1960s the United States became the world's leading industrial powerhouse. Pennsylvania served as a key location for several important industries including steel, lumber, textile and garment manufacturing, and coal mining.

Pennsylvania lays claim to two specific types of coal. Bituminous or "soft coal" is found mainly in western and southwestern areas of the state. Anthracite or "hard coal" is found in a five hundred square mile area of northeastern Pennsylvania stretching from Lackawanna County to upper Dauphin County. Beneath these mountains and river valleys lay the largest deposits of anthracite anywhere in the western world.

Between 1830 and 1959 more than nine billion tons of anthracite were mined and delivered to

market. It was a principal source of energy to heat homes and factories and power railroads, and was an important source of jobs for thousands of immigrants from Great Britain, Germany, and eastern and southern Europe.

The story of anthracite is the story of the rapid rise and eventual decline of one of America's great industries. It is also the story of human conflict, tragedy, destitution among mine workers and their families, and bitter disputes between coal company owners and workers. Unfortunately, violence was not foreign to the coalfields. One such incident of violence and death is the massacre at Lattimer Mines on September 10, 1897.

The small coal patch town of Lattimer Mines was founded in 1869, near Hazleton. Its first residents were mainly Welsh. Successive waves of



immigrants in the latter nineteenth century came to the region. By the late 1800s Lattimer was populated mostly by Italians. Surrounding patch towns consisted mainly of Slavic immigrants.

At its center was the colliery in which workers processed coal from mines beneath the town into various sizes for shipment to market. Workers and their families lived in company homes built and rented by mine owner Ariovistus Pardee of Hazleton, one of the wealthiest individuals in the United States at the time. In its social and economic fabric Lattimer was essentially no different than the numerous other patch towns in the anthracite region.

While conflict between mine owners and mine workers was common in the region, the summer and fall of 1897 proved to be a particularly troublesome period, especially in and around Hazleton where many of the mines were owned by the Lehigh and Wilkes-Barre Coal Company.

Immigrant workers had been agitated for some time for a variety of reasons. For one, coal companies often adopted paternalistic attitudes toward immigrants—some operators believed that the company's wealth and power gave it the right to use and treat workers as they wished. Many immigrants experienced prejudice and bigotry because of their ethnic backgrounds (Slavic miners were frequently referred to as "hunkies," for example) and, as relative newcomers, they were often assigned the most difficult and dangerous jobs in the mines.

In addition, workers were required to shop at company-owned stores where prices were inflated, stretching already meager family budgets. It was not uncommon for a worker's paycheck to amount to virtually nothing after the company deducted rent due for company houses, fees for the company doctor, and amounts due to the company store for the purchase of food and other necessities. As a result,

many families were indebted to the company. Workers viewed this as nothing less than servitude.

They were equally troubled by the imposition of a so called "alien tax" by the Pennsylvania General Assembly which required a three-cent per-day levy on all immigrant employees. An anti-immigrant measure, the coal companies deducted the tax from employee wages. Complicating matters was the fact that an immigrant's earnings were already lower than the amount paid to their Anglo-Saxon counterparts for the same type of work. In addition, coal companies purposefully failed to abide by a law which required them to pay employees in lawful money every two weeks instead of once monthly. All of these issues produced anger and resentment among immigrants.

Some patch town residents were outspoken about these matters. "Big Mary" Septak, a Slavic woman who operated a boarding house in Lattimer, rallied workers around the idea of opposing what she viewed as the tyranny of coal companies. Known to deliver fiery and compassionate speeches in various native tongues she stirred the consciousness of workers in an effort to inspire collective action and to promote the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) as the solution. The new union promised economic justice for mine

workers and to end exploitation by the coal companies.

Through the summer of 1897 policies targeted against immigrant workers continued. On Monday, August 16, more than 350 angry workers, protesting the violent

*Breaker at Lattimer  
(Pennsylvania State Archives)*







*Mike Cheslak (insert) was killed in the massacre leaving his wife Ella and his five children destitute. (Stonehill College)*

attack on a young picketer at the Honey Brook Colliery in McAdoo, marched to each of the neighboring Lehigh and Wilkes-Barre collieries, closing them down. By the end of the day more than three thousand workers joined the strike. Mining communities by now were in a state of turmoil. Worker anger was building, strike activities expanded, UMWA organizing continued, workers voted to affiliate with the union, and minor outbreaks of violence became more common.

On September 1, Lehigh and Wilkes-Barre workers formally voted to strike. The walkout soon swelled to five thousand and included employees of smaller independent coal companies. Marches were organized with the intent of shutting down collieries. On September 3, a group of more than a thousand men proceeded from McAdoo to Hazleton and closed down several collieries. Demonstrations continued throughout Labor Day weekend

and by mid-week, some ten thousand workers from throughout lower Luzerne County and neighboring Carbon and Schuylkill Counties joined the protest.

Coal operators thought that they had a war on their hands. Immigrant miners, in their view, were acting like vigilantes bent on attaining their goals. The operators wanted to put an end to what they considered to be lawlessness. Luzerne County Sheriff James Martin, vacationing in Atlantic City over the holiday, was called back home. His expertise was demanded by the coal operators to quell the growing unrest. It was up to Martin to end the strike.

Martin declared a state of civil disorder which authorized him to form a posse. By the evening of September 6, he had over eighty volunteers. His deputized force consisted mainly of professional men with English, Irish, and German backgrounds—people whose livelihoods were, in one form or



another, linked with the coal operators. Martin swore in his deputies and armed them with new Winchester rifles accompanied by metal-piercing bullets and buckshot.

On the evening of Thursday, September 9, a delegation of Lattimer workers met with striking UMWA members in nearby Harwood. The Lattimer workers wanted to join the walk-out and requested that the strikers march to Lattimer the following day to close the colliery. The strikers, knowing that no concessions could be won from Pardee without a show of unity, agreed to aid their Lattimer associates. The march was planned for the next day.

Friday, September 10, was a warm and sunny day. Some three hundred men assembled at Harwood, gathered a few American flags to display during their march, and set off for Lattimer. They proceeded peacefully and unarmed. In their view, they were simply expressing the American rights to assembly and free speech. Sheriff Martin received word of the procession and mobilized his deputies. As the column neared Hazleton they encountered Martin's posse. The sheriff drew his pistol, pointed it at the head of a marcher, and ordered them to disperse. They refused. A fight broke out. One of the deputies grabbed a flag and ripped it to pieces. Further violence was averted only when the police chief insisted that the column could continue only if they agreed to march around Hazleton. They agreed and proceeded peaceably. Anxieties were running high.

Martin and his deputies boarded trolleys to pursue the marchers at Lattimer. Trolley passengers reported that the talk was of shooting. One deputy was overheard saying "I bet I drop six of them when I get over there." A reporter relayed to the *Wilkes-Barre Times* that serious trouble was on the horizon. Word spread quickly. In Lattimer, children were hustled from the schoolhouse by apprehensive mothers. The colliery whistle sounded a shut-down. Company police and other deputies met Martin at Lattimer with a combined force of over 150 men. They lined the forked entrance to the town and waited.

**"It was not a battle because they were not aggressive, nor were they defensive because they had no weapons of any kind and were simply shot down like so many worthless objects, each of the licensed life-takers trying to outdo the others in butchery."**

*—Inscription on the Monument  
erected at Lattimer, 1972.*

At nearly 3:45 in the afternoon the marchers, now numbering over four hundred, approached Lattimer with the American flag in the lead. Martin walked to the head of the column and announced that they must disperse. Not all marchers, particularly those in the back, could hear or see him. Martin attempted to tear the flag from the hands of Steve Jurich. Thwarted, he then grabbed a marcher from the second row. When others came to the marcher's aid, a scuffle broke out while part of the group continued forward. Martin drew his pistol and pulled the trigger, but the weapon did not fire.

Then someone yelled "Fire!" and "Give two or three shots!" (several eyewitnesses claimed it was the sheriff, though he would later deny this). A barrage of shots rang out. The flag bearer was the first man hit, crying to God in Slovak, "O Joj! Joj! Joj!" as he fell mortally wounded. Several marchers at the front of the column realized that the deputies were not using blanks.

Those who understood what was occurring immediately began to scatter. Some ran toward the nearby schoolhouse. Teachers Charles Guscott and Grace Coyle watched the events unfold and thought at first that the bullets were blanks, until several men running toward them fell to the ground. Other shots





*A street scene in Lattimer c. 1897, showing conditions faced by miners and their families. (Stonehill College)*

pierced the schoolhouse walls, sending wooden splinters through the air.

Some deputies broke rank to take better aim at fleeing marchers, shooting them in the back as they ran. Trying to escape a bullet, miner John Terri threw himself on the ground. Another miner fell on top of him, dead. Andrew Jurecheck attempted to run toward the schoolhouse and was stopped by a bullet in his back. He pleaded in vain that he wanted to see his wife before he died. Mathias Czaja was likewise hit in the back and fell to the ground. Some of the wounded cried out for help, to which one eyewitness heard a deputy respond, "We'll give you hell, not water, hunkies!"

The shooting continued for at least a minute and a half, though some eyewitnesses claimed it may have been three minutes or more. Perhaps as many as 150 shots were fired. The magazines in several of the sixteen-cartridge Winchesters were fully discharged. Blood, smoke, road dust, and cries of anguish overwhelmed the scene. Nineteen marchers lay dead. Another thirty-six were wounded. The force of the steel bullets literally tore many of the bodies to pieces. Even those who had taken bullets in their limbs were critically

wounded. A few of the deputies walked among the dead and dying, kicking them, while others helped those who were wounded. When the shooting stopped Sheriff Martin uttered, "I am not well."

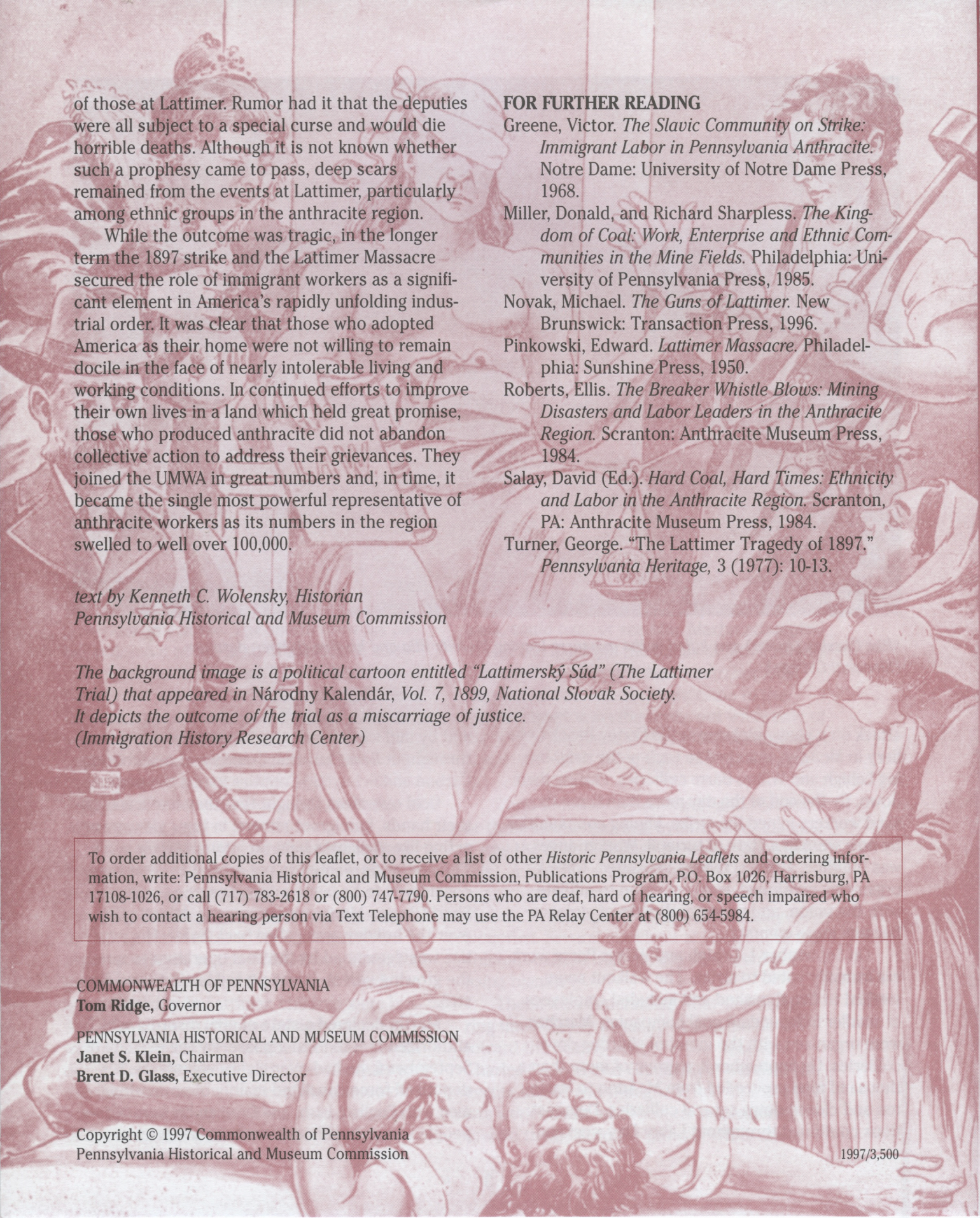
News of the bloodshed spread quickly. Wagons and trolleys moved the dead and dying to local hospitals and

morgues. While Sheriff Martin departed for Wilkes-Barre to meet with his attorney, families of the marchers gathered in anguish and disbelief to learn the fate of the men. The deputies scattered—some to Atlantic City to seek refuge under assumed names in the Traymore Hotel.

By the next day, the governor detached the Third Brigade of the State Militia to the Hazleton area to maintain public order, as it was feared that reprisals for the killings were all but certain. However, except for one attack on the home of a mine superintendent, the immigrants remained peaceful in their grief, hoping that the American court system might bring the deputies to justice. Funerals continued for several days, sometimes drawing crowds of as many as eight thousand. Polish, Slovak, Lithuanian, and other ethnic organizations regionally and nationally expressed their grief and outrage at the massacre at Lattimer Mines.

In late February, 1898, Sheriff Martin and his deputies were tried for murder at the Luzerne County Court House in Wilkes-Barre. The trial, which lasted for twenty-seven days in a full courtroom, ended in acquittal. While the posse walked free, resentment and bitterness were not as easy to snuff out as the lives





of those at Lattimer. Rumor had it that the deputies were all subject to a special curse and would die horrible deaths. Although it is not known whether such a prophesy came to pass, deep scars remained from the events at Lattimer, particularly among ethnic groups in the anthracite region.

While the outcome was tragic, in the longer term the 1897 strike and the Lattimer Massacre secured the role of immigrant workers as a significant element in America's rapidly unfolding industrial order. It was clear that those who adopted America as their home were not willing to remain docile in the face of nearly intolerable living and working conditions. In continued efforts to improve their own lives in a land which held great promise, those who produced anthracite did not abandon collective action to address their grievances. They joined the UMWA in great numbers and, in time, it became the single most powerful representative of anthracite workers as its numbers in the region swelled to well over 100,000.

*text by Kenneth C. Wolensky, Historian  
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*The background image is a political cartoon entitled "Lattimerský Súd" (The Lattimer Trial) that appeared in Národný Kalendár, Vol. 7, 1899, National Slovak Society. It depicts the outcome of the trial as a miscarriage of justice.  
(Immigration History Research Center)*

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## FOR FURTHER READING

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